

## National salvation forum: unity and conflict of opposites

No. 16/217, April 16 2001

The assembly of the «People's Initiative of the National Salvation Forum (Democratic Opposition)» on April 7 offered a number of answers to questions about the Forum's political agenda and prospects of the Ukrainian opposition. Paradoxically, but the answers themselves opened way to more questions about the institution's agenda and structure, plans and prospects. So far no credible answers to those questions have been given.

In early April the National Salvation Forum (NSF) announced that the Public Committee «For Ukraine without Kuchma», the Public Committee «For Truth!» and the NSF had authorized the NSF Council to coordinate the united opposition's activities. Yet, the allies failed to hide contradictions from the public eye. «I can agree with Yulia Tymoshenko on many things but, unfortunately, I do not quite share the optimism she has expressed today,» a NSF leader, member of the Rukh and the Reforms-Congress faction Taras Chornovil, MP, told the press immediately after the assembly, commenting on Tymoshenko's program speech («1+1», TSN, April 7, 2001). The statement sheds light on internal contradictions that may be observed in the NSF's structure and agenda.

Specifically, the assembly adopted a key resolution: to prepare a national referendum for early termination of President Leonid Kuchma's term in office, and to appeal to all political parties and blocks for support of the referendum idea. It was argued that «legally the referendum can be carried out only by means of organizing it by the Forum itself; the Forum will also count the votes, and that will be a kind of expression of public opinion that will be impossible to ignore» (UNAIN, April 7, 2001)

Leader of the Batkivshchyna Yulia Tymoshenko can be rightfully seen as one of the authors of the idea. Speaking at the assembly, she argued she believed that was the only way to ensure President Kuchma's resignation: «This is not just reality, this is the case when there is no alternative» (Holos Ukrainy, April 10, 2001). She also suggested that protest actions practiced by the Forum were «insufficient measure», as they were «supposed to continue alongside with a clear legal procedure of the President's resignation through a referendum,» (Holos Ukrainy, April 10, 2001). Tymoshenko's proposal was supported by Socialist leader Oleksandr Moroz. Hence, the assembly «resolved to start the procedure of organizational-legal preparations for holding a referendum on early termination of powers of the President» (www.korrespondent.net, April 7, 2001).

The idea of the referendum did not emerge in the opposition in April. For instance, in March Oleksandr Moroz argued that the political crisis would reach its peak in three months and, as a result, «the current President will have to resign either after a referendum initiated by the Verkhovna Rada or after the announcement of the impeachment procedure» (UTAR, Express-Inform, March 6, 2001). While then the claims sounded merely rhetorical, recently they have received some programmatic features.

Meanwhile, as the referendum claims will determine the opposition's further plans, theoretically and practically, the whole idea has caused some skepticism about its feasibility among the opposition members. The political skepticism is based both on current political realities and legal provisions for holding a referendum. For instance, commenting on the NSF's plans, Taras Chornovil publicly stated «when we start the action that is doomed to fail we will give the trump-card to the President» (Ukraina Moloda, April 11, 2001). He believes the referendum would be a premature action under the current political circumstances, as «the idea of impeachment of the President» should be a «final, summing-up action of the opposition's performance».

The opinion is shared in some instances by another member of the NSF Council, Taras Stetskiy, MP, who described the idea of a referendum as a «nice but unrealistic» (Den, April 10, 2001). The «unrealism» of the proposed referendum stems from complicated organizational factors. Specifically, the Constitution of Ukraine (Article 72) stipulates that «the all-Ukrainian referendum is announced following the people's initiative at the demand of no less than 3 million of Ukrainian citizens who are eligible to vote. Provided that signatures in support of the referendum are collected in at least two thirds

of the regions and at least 100,000 signatures in each of the regions.» Second, another key point that makes the referendum idea not just unrealistic, but completely feckless, is the judgement of the Constitutional Court, issued in summer 2000 in connection with the April 16, 2000 referendum and debates over amending the Constitution in accordance with the referendum results. The Constitutional Court's judgement stipulated that issues brought to the referendum might not include proposals for issuing a no-confidence vote to the authorities elected by the people of Ukraine. The same provision is included in the Law «On National Referendum» approved by the parliament on March 15, 2001, by 233 votes (but not yet signed by the President and, therefore, not enacted). Besides, referendum results have to be confirmed by votes of at least 300 MPs. There is another point that makes a referendum problematic: Leonid Kuchma commented on it by saying he did not object to the idea of holding a referendum provided the organizers find enough money to do it... All these factors make the idea of holding a referendum rather distant from reality.

Hence, the assembly of April 7 made the initial public announcement of the intention to hold a referendum as a solution to the current crisis, but formally the NSF has not decided yet whether it will go for the referendum. While the referendum idea was vigorously debated at the assembly, a number of its participants were (and remain) hesitant about its feasibility. Yet, the NSF Council was authorized to organize and finalize the legal side of preparations for a national referendum that would seek public opinion about the idea of early termination of President Kuchma's term in office. The Council was also authorized to appeal to all political parties and groups for support. Yet, two days later, on April 9, it was announced that the NSF needed a week to decide how to go ahead with the referendum idea and, moreover, «whether to have it as a referendum at all» (UNIAN, April 9, 2001). A new initiative was to create a working group that would assess all possible scenarios and outcomes of such a referendum and «also different ideas into which the very idea of the referendum may transform» (UNIAN, April 9, 2001), as Taras Stetskiv, MP, put it. On April 12, one of coordinators of the «Ukraine without Kuchma» Volodymyr Chemerys announced that the NSF Council would make the final decision on organizing the referendum on April 17. The «week» looks like a rather long one...

The referendum on no-confidence vote to President Kuchma was one of the central points (but not the only one) of the opposition action plan. The centerpiece of the opposition's agenda is the demand for changing the current system of power. Hence, «the NSF's plans for the near future [include] making amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine that would provide for the re-distribution of the power authority in the President-parliament-government triangle, enhancing the role and mutual responsibility of the parliament and the government, holding genuinely transparent and democratic presidential and parliamentary elections, creating a government of public confidence, approving its program of action by the parliament, establishing an independent judiciary, fostering self-governance bodies through legal provisions for their financial, material and organizational abilities, transforming Ukraine into a state that would protect life, property and dignity of its citizens, uniting all groups of the population for strengthening Ukraine as a factor of European and global politics, a radical change of all societal relations, and development of human beings as the highest social asset» (UNIAN, April 7, 2001). Meanwhile, the idea to form a NSF association of MPs in the parliament (proposed by Serhiy Komisarenko) was not supported by the participants. According to Komisarenko, the groups would have «numbered at least 100 MPs and should actively propagate the idea of the Forum» which «would provide a possibility of a legal framework for amending the Constitution and approving bills for the pursuit of democratic elections» (UNIAN, April 7, 2001). Apparently, the proposal was not supported due to the multipartisan composition of the NSF and the fact that representatives of the opposition have different opinions about their place in the Forum and, therefore, the Forum's tasks and objectives.

Probably the same reasons motivated some public «misunderstandings» between current and potential members of the Forum. As its founders have announced, the National Salvation Forum («Democratic Opposition») consists of the «Ukraine without Kuchma» group, the Public Committee «For Truth!», and the NSF itself. Yet, some time ago the Committee «For Truth!» disseminated a statement that it had never authorized the NSF to coordinate the opposition movement. As one of the activists of the «For Truth!» Oles Doniy put it, «there has been no verified information that the Committee «For Truth!» approved the decision to transfer its authority in the political sphere to the National Salvation Forum. That was not the case. That decision was not made, the decision was not even discussed» (UTAR, News, April 7, 2001). However, On April 9 Doniy's words were refuted by a members of the «presidium» of the Committee «For Truth!» Volodymyr Chemerys: «the decision of the presidium of the Public Resistance Committee «For Truth!» about authorizing the Council of the National Salvation Forum to coordinate actions of the united opposition is absolutely legitimate» (UNAIN, April 9, 2001).

He also noted that the foundation documents of the Committee «For Truth!» included a clause that the Committee coordinates its activities with the Public Committee for protection of the Constitution «For Ukraine without Kuchma!» and the National Salvation Forum. Therefore, «guided by those foundation documents, members of the presidium of the Committee «For Truth!» voted for authorizing the NSF Council to coordinate the actions» (UNAIN, April 9, 2001).

A significant feature of the opposition is the lack of a clearly defined and generally accepted leader of the NSF. The absence of the leader was meant to demonstrate that the NSF would not transform into someone's election campaign staff for the forthcoming parliamentary elections. A few days ago Yulia Tymoshenko argued: «when the National Salvation Forum was formed, I initiated [the provision] that the Forum would have no leader so that the leadership did not make us lose ability to act as a united force» (Vysokyi Zamok, April 13, 2001). In her view, «leader of the united opposition receives huge political score for the forthcoming parliamentary elections» (Vysokyi Zamok, April 13, 2001). Speaking at the recent assembly, she repeated her earlier argument: she believed it would be a mistake to try and transform the Forum into an ordinary political party with traditional disputes about choosing the leader and efforts to use the association as a major political PR campaign. However, some facts suggest that the issue of leadership in the NSF in the context of the parliamentary and presidential elections is likely to become increasingly pressing. The fact that the NSF was established shortly after the dismissal of Tymoshenko from her position of Vice Prime Minister of Ukraine could not be a mere coincidence. It is natural for Tymoshenko to try and play the lead role in the NSF, and the recent developments have shown that she is both willing and able to continue playing that role. Meanwhile, we may now see a «rehearsal», when there is always a chance that the band will drop out of tune or start «improvising». The likely «improvisations» may have a damaging effect on the unity of the Forum.

In the context of future parliamentary and presidential election Yulia Tymoshenko's statement about her willingness to run for presidency sounds rather ambitious. Meanwhile, she also argues that she would be prepared to support another suitable candidate for presidency if she sees «in Ukraine a true leader, ready to sacrifice his life for the country» (Interfax-Ukraine, April 11, 2001). Nowadays she sees nobody suitable to fill that position among the «relevant team», but seeks to «form a team first of all». In the context of the NSF's future it is worth noting her other statement: «if the parties with whom I am currently interacting will put a break to the cause I will manage to achieve the result on my own» (Interfax-Ukraine, April 11, 2001). Today the Batkivshchyna leader is one of the most active if controversial figures within the NSF, and her involvement may play a critical role for the association, if she goes ahead with implementation of her stated political ambitions. If that is the case, regardless of its declared intentions the NSF risks to transform into a pre-election springboard to the Batkivshchyna leader. The development is unlikely to be favored by other leaders of the NSF. In particular, such an outcome may lead to a conflict with «eternal revolutionary» Oleksandr Moroz who has cherished presidential ambitions for quite a long time himself. Also, it is worth noting that most of the Ukrainian right-wing members of the NSF, primarily the Reforms and Order, seek to see Prime Minister Victor Yushchenko, and not Tymoshenko, as their candidate for presidency. Such aspirations, given the lack of a de jure leader of the NSF in the presence of at least one strong de facto leader makes the NSF vulnerable to potential break-ups and deeper internal tension.